

# *Sketch*

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Eddie Things

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## Eddie Things

I'm no one special. It's hard even to describe myself, I'm so average. People say "oh, hi!" after I've been in the room for maybe five minutes. I look like my mother did when she was twenty, and I suppose I'll be a chubby little Midwestern lady like her someday. Check out any college campus at high noon and you'll see a hundred copies of me strolling around. It's not like I *asked* for anything crazy to happen to me.

One day last November I was walking home from class with Eddie Cronin. It was one of those rainy fall afternoons we get when the sky's the color of lead and the sun's just a rumor. The little campus pond sat off to our right, all murky and churned-up and gray. It looked like the inside of my heart.

Eddie was saying something. I was too deep in my soggy thoughts to make it out.

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"Hm?" I grunted absently.

"I said, what are you doing over semester break?"

I hadn't even thought about it. I'd never had to before. During the two years I'd been with Kevin our spare time had sort of taken care of itself. We'd just known that we'd go to certain places and do certain things with certain people. I'd felt secure with that part of my life and it had helped me face other stuff that was a lot scarier. Now that I was alone, the thought of finding new things and new people was almost too much to take. It left me numb.

"I don't know," I replied. "Go home and hang with the folks, probably." *A hurt animal*, I thought. *Crawling back to the den to lick her wounds.*

"What are you going to do?" I asked. Since I had no life, I'd have to live someone else's vicariously.

"I'm going to Boston right after New Year's for a week or so."

Boston. A big cold city on the ocean where they'd had a tea party once. It was ... what? ... a thousand miles away? "Do you know people there?" I asked.

"A couple of friends from the navy. Haven't seen them in years, that's why I want to go." A beat Two beats. "Care to come along?"

I stopped in midstride and stared up at him. It had sounded too casual to be a joke.

Raindrops were popping off his black canvas fedora and dripping off the brim. The face beneath belonged to a man in his late twenties; square, with light coloring and a tiny overbite and sharp brown eyes that always seemed pleasantly surprised about something. It was a nice face, like a big old friendly dog's.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "I'm completely on the level about this. Places like that are just more fun if you see them with someone else."

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Okay, so he was serious. I scrambled for an easy way to get us both off the hook. "Eddie, I'm glad you thought about me, but there's just no way! I mean, my parents wouldn't let me go to South Padre Island with Kevin last spring."

I don't know what kind of reaction I expected from him. Disappointment, maybe. But he just gave me a funny sidelong smile, as if he were peeking around me at something I was trying to hide. It was like he understood what I'd just said better than I did.

We got to his corner and he said goodbye and strode away in the rain, limping a little on his bad ankle. I watched him go, hands in my pockets. I'd done the safe thing and I was afraid.

Eddie Cronin. He was a fact of my life, a fixture. I really didn't know that much about him. He'd been an officer in the navy once, until he'd broken his ankle and had to get out. He'd come back

home to go to grad school and now he was living off his disability pension and his teaching assistantship.

Eddie was a paradox. He didn't walk into a room as if he owned it; he acted as if he owned himself and that was enough. He was friendly to everyone but chose to have few friends. He'd work for hours with his freshman composition students, or chew them out in public if he didn't think they were doing their best. He'd written a couple of cheap trashy novellas for some paperback company out in Idaho, and he wrote beautiful little short stories that no one would pay him for. He was obviously on the move, but his direction was sort of a mystery.

I can't even recall the exact moment I first met him. Kevin knew him somehow, from a club or something. He was just an occasional social presence at first. But then Kevin left me, and he got most of our normal friends and I somehow ended up with Eddie.

I drew comfort from him because he didn't seem to be a threat. He kept the idea of men alive for me without reminding me of one in particular. We hung out together after class, weekends sometimes. He'd tell sea stories and talk about the writers he liked. I'd tell him about the buildings I wanted to design someday. I didn't correct people if they called him my new boyfriend.

The trip to Boston refused to go away. It kept scratching away at me the way the right choice always scratches away at the wrong one.

So I turned to my most trusted advisors, the women I'd lived with in the dorms through five grueling semesters. The consensus was cloudy. No one knew much about Boston, but a big debate broke out over whether Eddie was a pervert or not. They were still arguing about it when I left.

I knew Eddie and I absolutely wasn't afraid of him that way. But if my apprehensions weren't about him, then they had to be about me. It was bigger than the trip; it went beyond that.

It finally came to me one evening as I stared up at the dusk-gray ceiling. Shadows hovered up there, the kind that had looked like scary monsters when I was a kid. As I watched them, a little trap door popped open in my mind. For as long as I could remember, I'd let my life be run by the things that frightened me. I'd been scared of disappointing my parents, afraid of not becoming an architect, afraid of losing Kevin, just afraid. My fears had brought me to my present desolate state and abandoned me.

Suddenly, it was very important that I go see Boston.

Eddie answered on the first ring. "Hi," I said tentatively.

"What's up?" He sounded all brisk and breezy, as if I'd never blown him off.

"Are you still going to Boston?"

"Sure am." Silence after that. He wasn't going to help me out.

"Well, assuming I was able to come after all, how would we pay for it?"

"That's easy," he said amiably. "Remember the two grand Northwest Publishing gave me for *The Vampires of Mendicino*? I'm going to blow the whole thing. You can kick in what you can."

"Eddie?"

"Yeah? "

"Do you expect me to go to bed with you?"

"I have no expectations. Really. Why don't we get together tomorrow and make some plans?"

We agreed on a time and place to meet, and that was it. I sat there afterward, looking at the phone and feeling a little angry. I was taking an enormous chance on Eddie, going against everything I'd lived by. Not only had he not seemed appropriately grateful, but it was like

he'd known I'd go with him all along. And he had no expectations. Really.

By committing myself to the trip, I'd turned a lot of vague anxieties into real problems that had to be dealt with. My parents, for example. I handled them by inviting them to dinner with Eddie and informing them of our intentions. Dad stared at the tablecloth and Mom bit her lip rather than make a public spectacle of herself. I was amazed at how easy it was.

The semester ran itself out amid the usual scenes of cramming and hysteria. I spent the holidays at home. After one tense discussion, nothing more was said about Eddie and very little about anything else. The trip was only days away now, but the days seemed awfully long.

Then it was the last afternoon. I sat in my room, surrounded by a hundred square feet of clothes and suitcases, staring at the four little square packages in my hand. They were leftovers from the old days, when Kevin would never remember to bring his own. I was agonizing over whether to bring them out of retirement.

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My history as a wanton woman was as blah as the rest of me. I'd been a junior in high school when my boyfriend pressured me into having sex for the first time. It had hurt, I'd felt like a tramp, and I'd broken up with him the next day. After that, nothing until Kevin. My mother still preferred to think I was a virgin.

I stared at the things. If I took them, it meant that I planned to use them. Didn't it?

I decided to try the ouija board approach. I'd close my eyes and hum or something and let some higher power decide whether I dropped them in a suitcase or stuffed them under the mattress. I sat that way for a long time before I opened an eye and peeked at my hand. They were still sitting there, like a heap of giant shrink-wrapped spaghetti-os. I glared at them, muttered a nasty word and shoved them into my purse.

It was seven o'clock the next evening. I was at the wheel of Eddie's red '78 Triumph and we were flying east down Interstate 74 in

Indiana. I'd never driven a stick shift before and it was a lot easier than I'd thought. The night was clear and cold, and the farm lights on the horizon looked distant as the stars .

"...and so," Eddie was saying, "after they saw how bad my ankle was, they flew me back to the States and processed me for a medical discharge. I spent a while in the hospital and then I was out on the street with a check in my hand."

"How did you feel about that?" Eddie was rarely this open about his past, so I wanted him to keep talking.

"It's hard to explain if you haven't been through it." His words had a raw, new feeling, as if they'd never been told to anyone before. "I'd put everything into my so-called career that a lot of guys my age put into a marriage. When it was suddenly all gone ... well, I almost lost my mind."

I glanced over at him. He was sitting back in the passenger seat, his face half-lit by the dash lights, looking off into the black. I wondered what he saw out there, and what he was thinking.

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"Go on," I said.

It was a minute before he continued. "The whole thing gave me a new spin. I'd always thought I counted for something because someone gave me a rank and a fancy job description. But I was just another replacement part, really. I broke and they threw me out with the rest of the trash. That's how I found out about ambition; it's letting someone else hold your future hostage."

"But a person has to have some goals."

"Ambition and goals are two different things. I want to teach English at some little community college that's too small to have any political crap. Someplace down by the Gulf where you don't have to pay to be warm. Maybe rent a house on some cheap stretch of beach and write stories and drink margaritas in the evenings. Live my life like a Jimmy Buffet song."

“Who? “

“Sorry. Before your time.”

I kept my eyes on the road and didn't say anything. I wasn't comfortable with what I'd heard. I believed that a person had no right to do less than what she was capable of, because the world was tough and there was no margin for error. Eddie was eight years older than I. Either the wear and tear of life had made him give up on himself, or he'd stumbled across some awful truth that had escaped me thus far. One of us had to be right and the other had to be wrong, and why was I taking it all so personally...?

Suddenly there was a big thumping crash from under the hood. The tachometer started flopping around and all the idiot lights came on. I barely had time to say “oh, shit!” before Eddie lunged over and knocked the stick out of gear and shut off the ignition.

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I pulled over to the shoulder and let the car coast to a halt. We just sat there, listening to our breathing and the tick-tick-tick of the motor cooling down.

“What was that?” I finally asked. My voice sounded like that of a small person lost in a cave.

“That was probably the timing belt breaking,” Eddie said grimly. He was lying back, rubbing his temples. “I just hope we got the engine switched off before it could tear itself apart.”

I peered out the window. Everything was pitch black except for the glimmers on the horizon. There was a really bright one up the road, like a town or something, with lots of dark winter miles between us and it. I put a finger on the glass. It felt freezing cold for a second, then it felt like nothing.

“This is spooky,” I said.

Eddie was thumbing through a road atlas. He seemed distracted and preoccupied. “We're not that badly off,” he said. “Some



trucker will spot us and radio the highway patrol. What was that last mile marker we passed?”

“Thirty-two, I think.”

“That puts us right here.” His finger was resting next to what looked like a big town. “That’s probably what those lights are up ahead.”

“Crawfordsville. Is that it?”

Crawfordsville, Indiana (I learned later) is best known as the home town of General Lew Wallace, who wrote the novel *Ben Hur* and did a lot of other famous stuff. So the place has the Ben Hur Drive-in Theater, the Ben Hur Bowling Alley, and other Ben Hur-related places. It also had an all-night service station and several hundred motel rooms, virtually all of which were full by the time we got there. Thus it was that after hours of riding around in patrol cars and dirty tow trucks and waiting in the cold, we found ourselves in the office of the Ben Hur Motor Lodge.

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It was a cruddy little room done in baby-poop yellow, with plastic lobby furniture and a lonely looking rack of tourist brochures. One wall was graced with an autographed glossy photo of Charlton Heston in his charioteer’s costume.

Our host for the evening was a fat old sister in her forties with red fingernails and a face like a TV Guide. She couldn’t keep her dull, mean little eyes off my ringless left hand.

“All I got left is a single,” the Innkeeper from Hell was telling us. “One bed. Hope that won’t be a problem.”

I glared at her and tried to think of something mean to say.

“How much do we owe you?” Eddie asked coolly.

She raked in our money, grinning as if she’d seen through to our guilty little souls. I took the key in silence and marched out the

door. I was stranded, I was tired, and I'd be damned if I was going to compromise myself in this crummy place just to satisfy *her*.

Half an hour later I stood in the bathroom, brushing my hair and critiquing myself in the mirror. I'd just showered and wore nothing but panties and a frown.

I'd never make it as a Girl of the Big Eight. Everything was decent enough on top, but my waist and hips were too soft and doughy. I thought about Kevin, of his seeing me like this and maybe wondering if he could do better. How could he not have wondered that?

I slipped on my old green nightie and forced myself to chill out. Nothing was going right. I was confused and worried and I was in no mood for any earth-shattering new experiences.

I was hiding, really. Eddie was out there in the room, doing unknown things and thinking unknown thoughts. I had a nightmare image of his seeing tonight as some big opportunity, of his making a clumsy pass at me. That would just ruin everything for good.

I stood there for a long time with my shoulderblades pressed to the door, twisting my hairbrush around in my hands. I had to go out there sooner or later. I took a deep breath and turned around.

The room was a relief. The lights were on and everything was peaceful and quiet and bright. Eddie was sitting on the bed, his back to me, listening to someone on the phone.

It occurred to me that I'd never watched him before without his knowing it, so I stayed put and made like a mouse. He was wearing a long-sleeved thermal undershirt and a big baggy pair of running shorts. His hair was still cut short military style, and the stubble on the back of his neck caught the light and glowed. He was talking to someone about his car. I thought about what he must have been like in the old navy days: giving orders, looking after things.

He was deep in a discussion about valve stems when he leaned back against the headboard and winced as if something hurt. His foot came up onto the bed and I could see his ankle.

It was horrible. There was an awful strip of purple scar tissue all around it like torn meat, with little pinholes in the pale skin above and below where they sewn everything back together. I said “oh!” just as he looked up and saw me.

His face teetered for a moment between confusion and embarrassment before it settled on grim resignation. As if I were seeing this too soon and in the wrong place.

It took him about five seconds to end the conversation and hang up the phone. “That was the station,” he explained carefully. “We were lucky; all it needs is a new belt. And the hotel in Boston is holding onto our reservation.”

“That’s great.” My eyes couldn’t leave the mess on his leg.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said.

That wasn’t very reassuring. It looked like hell. “Does it hurt all the time?”

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“The VA has to take bone spurs out every couple of years. You wouldn’t believe the paperwork.” He took his foot off the bed and put it back on the floor, out of my sight.

I was cruelly torn at that moment. Part of me thought that Eddie was handling things the way he wanted them handled. Another part thought that he wasn’t the best judge and that I ought to sit next to him and kiss his ankle and make it all better. I just stood there feeling useless.

A thought drifted in from somewhere. Eddie had been worried about my seeing how bad his ankle really was. Maybe he felt like he had to be strong and in control of everything all the time. He was a guy, after all. I decided to take a chance.

You know,” I said brightly, “you’ve been great about all this. You’ve really taken care of things.” Which was true, actually.

It was like a generator kicked on inside him. He sat up and his eyes took on some of their usual gleam. "I'm glad you think so. You've been pretty great about everything yourself."

*Bingo, I thought.* Eddie had learned how to push entirely too many of my buttons. Now I knew how to push one of his.

Eddie glanced around as if something obvious had just dawned on him. "oh, hey, I'm sorry," he said as he got to his feet. "You're probably in a hurry to get to bed."

I didn't say anything. Anything I could say would probably be wrong.

He went to the closet and tossed one of the spare blankets on the floor. "I'll be over here by the TV," he said.

I tried to pick apart every nuance of his words and actions. I didn't think he was trying to lay a guilt trip on me and I didn't think he was trying to impress me with his manly generosity. He'd just matter-of-factly decided that I should have the bed and he should take the carpet. Either he'd sensed my feelings or he didn't care one way or the other where we slept.

I watched him as he spread the blanket out. Things could go wrong so fast, but this wasn't fair to him.

"Eddie? "

"You know, this bed has to be about eight feet wide. I think it's big enough for the both of us."

He just stood there, head cocked to one side, giving me the same look he'd given me that day by the lake. His mindreading look.

So we turned out all the lights but one in the corner, made a big project out of turning the spread down, and slipped into our sides of the bed without looking at each other. We said goodnight and silence fell.

The moment was tight all around me. I'd ended up about eight inches away from him, so I could feel his presence through the blankets and the mattress.

"Now just don't try anything funny," I heard myself say lightly, like a joke. I was horrified. It was like I was somewhere else, watching myself being stupid.

"No, ma'am," he replied in the same tone. A pause. "So ... do we think that holding's funny?"

"No," my mouth said on its own. "Holding is very serious."

We both rolled toward the center until we settled together like two puzzle pieces. I could feel his arm around me and the warm length of his rough leg against my smooth one. And that was how we stayed. I lay there with his heart beating under my palm. It felt calm, constant — an Eddie Cronin heartbeat.

And for the thousandth time, I wondered what was on his mind. I wondered if this was how men and women lived their lives: close enough to feel each other's blood flowing, trying to catch a stray glimmer of each other's thoughts. I was still pondering it when I drifted off to sleep.

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The next day was one of those days when you remember every single thing. We took turns driving and watched the country roll by. There was something new between us, an easy friendly trust that came from waking up in each other's arms.

We'd left behind the square open fields I'd always known. We were in a world of trees now, big gray winter-bare birches and maples that lined the roadsides and shook hands over our heads. The land got hillier and sometimes we could see the sun hitting the frost on the treetops.

Then we were in the mountains. The highway rose and fell, went over a hundred little creeks, and twisted and turned in a way that was new to me. The trees were still with us, covering the freezing

hillsides and standing on the ridgetops like teeth in a comb. I thought about the people who'd built this road, wondered if they'd only thought of these mountains as an obstacle to punch through. I hoped not.

Something jolted me awake. I opened my eyes and blinked until everything came clear. It was the middle of the night. The headlights were still picking up two endless rows of trees, but the road was perfectly flat now

"Are we there yet?" I asked, in the timeless tradition of weary young travelers.

"Almost."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Since Hartford. I woke you up because we're about to see something."

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And then the trees ended and the world opened up around us. on my side there was just endless empty black nothing. I cracked the window, sniffed the cold air that blew in, smelled salt. It was the ocean out there.

I looked off to the left and there was Boston. I'd seen big cities at night before, but this was a whole new thing. This was a big, big raft of millions of little lights, suspended in the dark like a galaxy. The lights were scattered at the edges and built up for miles and miles to the core. Everything there was high and vertical, glowing like diamond strings on velvet. The tallest building was at the very center, like the hub of a wheel, and it was *blue*.

I turned to Eddie, to make him part of the scene. He was watching me, grinning as if something charmed him.

"Just look at this!" I said.

"I've seen it before," he said. "I just haven't seen you see it."

It was four a.m. when we dropped off the expressway into the narrow streets of the city. Up close it seemed darker and awfully claustrophobic, a place built for horses and wagons. We drove west until we reached an open place, a big pretty park full of trees and lights and snow. The Big Blue Building was just down the street, towering over everything.

I rustled through our city map. "This must be Boston Common."

"Yeah. We'll park in the garage beneath it and go to the hotel and crash for a few hours. I'm about ready to drop."

I wasn't, but I looked him over and decided that I'd better let him get his forty winks. Tomorrow night I'd be all over him like a hot shower. I felt all warm and naughty in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. If ever.

We took a ticket at the ramp and left the car in a big oily cave under the Common. We found the stairs and began making our way up, debating drowsily about what we wanted to see and do the next day. Late as it was, there was no one around and no sound except for our echoing footsteps and voices.

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He must have been waiting for us, or someone like us. We'd just made it to the last landing and suddenly he was *there*, filling up the whole stairwell. A big dark guy with a green army jacket and a funny leather hat. He had strange light gray eyes, not stupid, but unfocused, distant.

"Got any money?" He sounded businesslike, bored even.

I was annoyed, thinking we'd have to give this jerk a couple of bucks to get him out of our way. Then I looked over at Eddie and I stopped being annoyed. He was staring down at something, his face all pale and tight. I followed his eyes and there was a gloved hand holding a knife. A big, big silver knife pointed straight at Eddie's rib cage.

My mind emptied out and then filled up again with some very basic stuff.

Like the fact that this man was probably going to kill us if he didn't get everything he wanted. Like the six-inch line running from the point of his knife to Eddie's coat button. Like the absolute total need to keep that line from getting any shorter.

Eddie was hauling his wallet out as the guy mumbled at him to hurry up. I remembered him dressing that morning, the hundred dollars in cash he'd put in there and the eighteen hundred bucks worth of traveler's checks he'd stuck in his sock. This could end up okay after all. Everyone could walk away happy and everything would be okay.

*Just let this thing happen, I thought silently. This isn't something you can control. Just let it happen and it'll go away.*

Or maybe not. Maybe this guy would slice us up no matter how much money we gave him. Maybe he'd want to haul me off somewhere and Eddie would object and I'd end up crying over a bloody corpse.

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It seemed like an hour had passed. The guy had taken the bills out of the wallet and dropped it on the floor. He turned to me and grunted, as if he were just noticing that I was there. And then his hand was on the shoulder strap of my purse.

*ok, fine, my mind chattered. You can have the purse. That's just fine. Take my class ring, take my confirmation cross, take anything that looks good to you. Fine.*

Suddenly there was a big heavy jolt. I lost my balance just as I got a glimpse of Eddie grabbing the guy's knife arm. We were all falling into each other, over each other.

I went down and smashed my head against the wall or something. By the time the sparks cleared I was alone on the landing and there were footsteps and shouts fading away up above. I got to my feet and stumbled up the stairs, holding a hand on my sick head, listening to Eddie's name echo off the walls as if someone were screaming.

And then I was running through the trees and snow like a crazy woman following the fresh tracks. The need to catch up with



Eddie was pulling me so hard that I didn't have to think. Some isolated piece of my mind was marveling at how much like a Christmas card everything looked.

I skidded around a corner and stopped. There was a body stretched out under a tree in front of me. I couldn't see its face, but it was tall and it was wearing Eddie's engineer's boots. It wasn't moving.

I stood there looking down at him. Of course he was dead. I didn't feel any of the things a person is supposed to feel. A voice from somewhere was telling me that I had sixty or seventy more years to get through. It didn't matter; my life was over. Just over.

Eddie's corpse started to move. He looked up at me and blinked like a sleepy raccoon. "My ankle gave out," he said.

I just looked at him, my face getting hotter and my chest getting tighter. I felt like *kicking* his damned ankle.

"WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?" I screamed. "YOU COULD HAVE GOTTEN YOURSELF *KILLED*, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE! YOU STUPID SHIT!"

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Eddie stared at me as if I were purple or something. He'd never heard me talk that way before. Neither had I.

"He was after your purse..." he said.

I grabbed my purse and waved it in front of him. "YOU KNOW WHAT'S IN HERE?" I scooped out a handful of hankies and combs and loose change and threw it all over the ground. "*CRAP!* HOW DO YOU THINK I'D FEEL IF I HAD TO WALK UP TO YOUR PARENT'S FRONT DOOR AND TELL THEM YOU'D GOTTEN YOURSELF KILLED DEFENDING MY *CRAP*? I'D FEEL LIKE *SHIT*, THAT'S HOW I'D FEEL!"

And then I wasn't angry anymore. I didn't even feel it stop. Suddenly it was cold and my mind was full of what had almost happened to us. The ground hit my knees and then my arms were around his neck and his arms were around me. I was crying. Between sniffles I

told him how glad I was that he hadn't died. I said it over and over again because I really wanted him to know.

"I love you," he said. His voice sounded rusty, as if something were being used for the first time in a long time.

I felt everything inside me tinkle into little pieces and melt away. Men have a hard time understanding why women need to hear those words regularly and often. Well, we just do.

"Tell me," I said.

He lay there rocking me back and forth as if I were a little kid. His hand was on my hair and I could feel his chin move against the top of my head as he spoke. "I guess I've felt this way since the first time I saw you. When you and Kevin walked into Wallaby's that night, remember? You lit the room up."

I didn't remember exactly, but that was beside the point. "Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"Talk's cheap. I was waiting for a chance to show you somehow. And then I was lying here and it hit me that I might have died and you'd have never known. Wouldn't that have been sad?"

"I'm not worth all that. No one is."

"You are."

"Stupid." The words came out of my mouth like a cat's meow. I decided that I'd just have to put up with these Eddie things from now on if I wanted to get to the really good stuff.

We lay like that for a very long time, in the snow and the trees. Flakes started falling and we never noticed.

*Anthony Ames*